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Norman Frajman Holocaust Survivor

As told to H. Martin Leitner

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Norman Frajman is a surviving witness to the Nazi Holocaust . He has kept as a perpetual reminder of his experience the striped jacket that was a part of the uniform that he wore in the Concentration Camps of Majdanek, Buchenwald and Skarzysko. He was born in 1929 in Warsaw where a Jewish population of 365,000 resided, representing approximately 10% of the total Jews in Poland . Jews had lived in Poland for a thousand years contributing in inverse proportion to their numbers to the commercial, cultural and civic spheres.

. There were signs at the time that pointed to an ominous future. In 1927, a Jewish journalist, Hillel Zeitlin had warned that," the Jews will be the first victims of Nazi atrocities and the entire world would ultimately be engulfed by their degeneracy." (Zeitlin was killed in 1942 on the way to the death camp at Treblinka.)

In response to a demand by Adolph Hitler who occupied one of twelve seats held by the Nazi party in the German Reichstag (Parliament) in 1929, a referendum was held to repudiate the Treaty of Versailles that Germany signed after its defeat in World War I. This proposition was defeated, however the popularity of the Nazi party continued to grow and by 1930 it was the second largest party controlling 107 seats. In 1933 Adolph Hitler was named Chancellor and German Jews began their exodus to any country that would accept them. Many fled to Warsaw where they were welcomed by the large Jewish Community.

Once in power, Hitler began the dismemberment of the German Republic,

ultimately vesting all power in himself . All other political parties were banned, the Treaty of Versailles was disavowed and in October of 1933 Germany resigned from the League of Nations, an act approved by 90% of the electorate in a plebiscite held the following month. Compulsory military service was re-introduced in 1935 and the size of the German Army increased . Shortly thereafter the Nuremberg laws disenfranchised the Jews, classifying them as non-citizens and removing them, from government , university positions and military service. Intermarriage was banned and Jews could no longer employ domestics of Aryan decent.

Meanwhile in Poland between 1933 and 1935, there were anti-Semitic riots and pogroms which resulted in fatalities. The Polish Ministry of Commerce issued an order that shop signs must include the owners name as it appeared on their birth certificate, insuring that Jewish owned businesses would be easily recognized. By November 1938 , Nazi prohibitions and propaganda demonizing the Jews resulted in Kristallnacht, the night of shattering of glass in Jewish Synagogues and business establishments. 191 Synagogues were set ablaze, 91 Jews were killed and 30,000 were herded off to concentration camps. Buchenwald was opened as a prison camp for professional criminals sentenced by the courts. Subsequently it would become a concentration camp where these very same murderers and criminals became Kapos who would then act as overseers, guards and taskmasters of the Jews .

Neville Chamberlain ,England's Prime Minister, responding to events in 1939 wrote, " I believe the persecution arose out of two motives: a desire to rob the

Jews of their money and a jealousy of their superior cleverness. No doubt Jews aren't a lovable people; I don't care about them, myself: but that is not sufficient reason to explain the pogroms." History would later attribute, World War II to Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler, and also the subsequent death of untold millions on a scale never before witnessed by mankind.

On September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland, Warsaw was bombed by the Luftwaffe and the Polish government recommended the evacuation of the city. Norman's family heeded the warning and left by horse and wagon. His father Leon, Mother Hela, sister Renia and other relatives comprised the group fleeing to the Russian sector in eastern Poland. The Russian Army was there as a result of a pact between Hitler and Stalin which was designed to placate Russia and neutralize her huge military potential. The family stayed there for approximately six months when news arrived from Warsaw indicating that the situation there was not too bad. In order to return they would have to make arrangements to smuggle themselves back across the new frontier. While making this attempt they were intercepted by a Russian border patrol and placed under arrest and taken to a makeshift jail. After a few days, with the exception of his father, they were released and managed to make their way back to Warsaw. Twenty two years would pass before Norman would be re-united with his father.

In the fall of 1940, the Nazis crowded all the Jews of Warsaw into a ghetto that they created by walling off a section of the city, moving Gentiles out into seized Jewish homes and apartments. The ghetto eventually housed a half million souls including many

who had fled Germany and also from other parts of Poland . A reward of five pounds of sugar was offered to anyone reporting an escapee from the ghetto. Starvation , beatings, lack of medication and disease soon resulted in corpses lying in the streets to be collected daily by the living skeletons and carted off to mass graves. 85,000 Jewish lives ended this way. 300,000 were sent off to the concentration camps at Treblinka and .Majdanek, and an uprising that lasted from April 19, to May 16, 1943 was put down by Nazi tanks, flame throwers and artillery resulted in the complete destruction of the ghetto and the slaughter of the remaining 70,000. Considering the fact that all of Poland was occupied in three weeks and France was vanquished in a month, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was a feat of enormous heroic proportions against an enemy whose armed might was a legend in its time.

Norman, his mother and sister were amongst those who are sent to the Majdanek concentration Camp. 120 people were loaded into box cars designed to hold 8 horses and two handlers. By the time they arrived at their destination, many had died from the lack of food, water, sanitary facilities, some are sickly and some suffered mental breakdowns. A few managed to cut the barb wire strung over a small window and climb off the train managing to escape. When the doors of the boxcars were finally opened they were ordered to get off, surrounded by German and Lithuanian guards and camp inmates, who were now Kapos. They were lined up five abreast, beaten with batons and marched to the camp. As they neared the camp the air was filled with the smell of burning flesh. An elderly gentleman alongside Norman began to recite the prayer of an

observant Jew that is said on his death bed. That night they spent in an open field inside the camp grounds. In the morning the selection and dehumanizing process continued. Men and women were separated, either to be kept alive for slave labor or sent to their death in the gas chambers and reduced to ashes in the crematorium. Norman did not know then that this day it would be the last time that he would see his mother and sister

. Those destined for slave labor were made to undress, beaten again as they lined up in single file to go into the showers. When they emerged they were shaved of all their bodily hair, head, underarms, and groin ,after which they were painted with a creosote type liquid which caused an unbearable burning sensation. This was followed by the distribution of un-sized clothing, consisting of a thin jacket, pants, and wooden clogs, no socks and no underwear.

The camp was divided into sections, the third section was assigned to survivors of the Warsaw ghetto uprising who were now considered dangerous criminals. 350 to 400 were assigned to a barrack where they slept on storage shelf- like cubicles stacked three high and three individuals sharing a cubicle.. Bedding consisted of a bag of straw for a mattress and a recycled lice infested blanket. Everyone was assigned an identification number. At this camp Norman' numbers was 4215.

The daily camp routine called for 3:30 am wake up, assembling outdoors, which included carrying out anyone who had died during the night in order to be counted. Breakfast consisted of coffee brewed from burnt wheat husks or on rare occasions a cup of mint leaf tea.

A quarter pound of margarine was shared by sixteen and less than a two pound loaf of bread by twenty prisoners. Norman often used the margarine as if it were an ointment to treat his eczema. At noon lines would form for a bowl of thin, very hot soup. Often the whistle signaling the return to work would blow before the soup cooled enough to be swallowed, it was simply thrown away.

Beatings by the sadistic guards known as Kapos was a common occurrence. At night they would often inspect the barracks and if they discovered a bed that was not made up or anything not to their liking, they would beat the individual until he was unable to move. The work mainly consisted of digging by hand, using picks, shovels and wheelbarrows preparing construction sites. Groups of 30 to 40 were assigned to this task and it was always uncertain as to who would return alive at the end of the day.

Norman witnessed many sadistic atrocities at this camp. A prisoner was hung and while hanging, his teen age son was ordered to hold his father's hand. Another prisoner was hung with a mirror in front of his face so that he could watch himself die. On another occasion a Kapo at a work site beat a prisoner to the ground, then stepped on the man's throat and calmly took out an egg, which he proceeded to eat while the individual writhed in death's throes. At the end of the work shift his body had to be carried back to the camp by his fellow inmates. It was standard practice to bring the body back to camp if they died while working.

In July or August 1943, Norman was led to believe that his mother and sister were being moved to another camp. Transports were forming to move a large group

of prisoners to another camp for forced labor. Anxious to be re-united with his mother and sister, he managed to be included in the group selected for the transfer to Camp Skarzysko which was the location of an ammunition factory. The camp was divided into three subsidiary camps, A,B and C. The operations in C camp were the most hazardous. Missiles were being filled with a yellow colored powder propellant that in time turned the skin yellow. Those who were continuously exposed to this powder, without protective clothing eventually died from a debilitating liver condition.

Fortunately, Norman was assigned to Camp A where bullets and grenades were manufactured. One day, when winter had arrived, he was assigned along with two other prisoners to paint a watch tower with creosote. He worked all day suspended by ropes in bitter cold, the creosote burning his unprotected hands, and simultaneously plagued by frostbite. As a result of mal-nourishment and being bitten by an infected louse he came down with a severe case of typhus that lasted for fourteen days. The standard cure for those who were sick and unable to work was the firing squad . Since this camp did not take a daily head count, a friend helped him hide under a pile of wood shavings during the work selection process until he recovered enough of his strength to be able to return to work. He credits this friends help with saving his life.

Near the end of 1944 the Nazis ordered the camp evacuated in the face of the advancing Russian army. The new camp destination was Schlieben a branch of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in Germany. Here they manufactured anti-tank bazooka weapons under the supervision of the SS(Storm troopers).

Conditions were just as consistently bad as at the previous slave labor camps; daily beatings, lack of food , medication and protective clothing. When the weather turned colder he managed to steal a cement sack to wear under his prison jacket. One night there was an explosion in the factory, filling the air with arms, legs, heads and assorted body parts. Even though several hundred died in the explosion, the Germans brought in additional SS Troops to supervise and accelerate the reconstruction. Work was carried out day and night and in just one week the factory was back in operation . A railroad siding that led into the plant also had to be restored. Teams of eight men were assigned to lift the frozen rails into place. Without gloves, flesh became glued to steel and frostbite again attacked any part of the body that was unprotected. Even to this very day Norman's hands suffer from the effects of the frostbite..

As the Russian Army continued its advance, the camp was evacuated, again loaded on box cars to be shipped to another unknown destination. At various times the train stopped and some cars were unloaded and their human cargo marched off to an uncertain fate. Norman's group were taken off the train, they were force marched from town to town, stopping along the way to dig anti-tank ditches. Whoever was unable to keep up with the march was taken away and shot. At night they slept in barns or school houses and the local peasants were ordered to provide them with some soup. The last village that they reached was Nixdorf which was near the border of Czechoslovakia . On the morning of May 9 , when they awoke, the SS, the guards and Kapos had all

disappeared For a time the group was bewildered, confused and fearful until they realized that their captors had fled and they were free at last.

Desperate for the need of food and decent clothing Norman went into a nearby German occupied house and took whatever he needed. When the Russians arrived he went to work for them as an interpreter. After leaving this job, he made his way to a displaced person's camp near Berlin in the American occupied sector, where he waited until he would be allowed to go to the United States. He eventually made contact with an Uncle living in the States who helped him emigrate to America. His uncle had lost a son in the American Army's landing on the beaches of Anzio, Italy, Norman would become this son's replacement.

When asked what was the most perplexing memory of his captivity, he responded that in all that time in the concentration camps he couldn't recall hearing birds singing or seeing butterflies. Perhaps it was because in hell there are no birds or butterflies.

Norman Frajman is now retired and living in Boynton Beach with his wife Shelly and daughter Susan. He has another married daughter, one grandson and a newborn grand daughter. He has made it his personal mission to tell his story to any group who ask and especially to school children so they will know what actually happened when the German people allowed themselves to become obsessed by hate. While people are capable of inhuman and immoral acts, they also have the capacity to choose noble acts of kindness and dignity. Judaism teaches that every person is

born with an inclination to do good or evil. Man's struggle and Norman's goal is to make sure that good prevails and the Holocaust is never repeated. Never again!

His speaking engagements can be arranged through the Jewish Community Center in Boca Raton and Florida Atlantic University's Holocaust studies department.

